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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the connection between early childhood education and feminist thinking. It presents a brief overview of feminist theory, feminist epistemology, and theories and models of early childhood education. The overview lays the groundwork for the essay's main philosophical argument: feminism's emphasis on care, concern, and connection (referred to as "love") can make a significant and positive contribution to the field of early childhood education. The paper advocates that early childhood curriculum be based on love and care, and suggests that, at least to a certain extent, teachers should feel, think, and act like parents. Although the paper discusses the similarities between teaching and mothering, it does not argue that teachers act as mother substitutes. Contains 47 references. (AS)

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What's Love Got to Do With It?: Feminist Theory and Early Childhood Education

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is a field dominated by women practitioners. Recent data indicate that 84.06% of all elementary school teachers and 99.02% of all pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers are women (Bergmann 1986). Yet despite this strong association of women educators and young children, there have been few connections made between early childhood education and feminist theory or thinking. Feminist writers on education tend to focus on issues relating to more mature learners, while early childhood educators tend to draw on more traditional sources of information, such as developmental psychology and curriculum studies, to inform their practice. Although there are some reasonable explanations for this chasm (see Goldstein 1993, Grumet 1988), it remains puzzling. And it gives rise to an intriguing question: what contribution could feminist thinking make to the field of early childhood education? This paper attempts to answer that question.

In this paper, the traditional Review of the Literature section will be replaced by a review of the literatures. In this section I will cover, albeit briefly, feminist theory, feminist epistemology, feminist research methodologies, and will attempt to offer an overview of theories of early childhood education. The purpose of this far-reaching section is to provide

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the necessary groundwork upon which I will build the philosophical/ theoretical argument of this paper, the section in which I develop my theories about feminism's contribution to early childhood education.

A Personal Aside: On Definitions and Labels

Both "feminism" and "early childhood education" are somewhat slippery terms that tend to be used in many different contexts with many different meanings. Although I hope to make connections between early childhood education and feminism, I realize that not all early childhood educators are women, nor are they all feminists. I do not intend to create rigid categories or to exclude any interested early childhood practitioners. In fact, it is difficult and problematic to use the word feminism at all, as if it were a monolithic entity rather than a blanket term that encompasses many different and equally valid feminisms. It is necessary to make clear what I mean by the term feminism, and by the term early childhood education, and say a few words about how they will be used in this paper.

First, both terms have their generic definitions. Feminism, it would be generally agreed, is a social movement that intends to call attention to the oppression of women and, ultimately, to put an end to it (Narayan 1989, Mies 1991, Farganis 1989, among many others). The field of early childhood education, according to The National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp 1987), encompasses both the custodial care and the education of children from birth through age 8. These generic definitions will be used throughout the paper whenever I am speaking historically or generally on these two topics.

At other times, however, these terms will have more specific, and more personal, meanings. I acknowledge the validity of the generic

definition of feminism. However, in my view, not all work that deals with women's inequality in society is feminist, and not all feminist work deals directly with women and oppression. My personal definition of feminism, the one that colors my work and informs my thinking, dives deeply into recent developments in feminist theory and epistemology, and is rooted in my own experience as a mother, a woman, a scholar, and an early childhood educator. I define feminism as a critical perspective that values ideas, positions, and ways of knowing and thinking that have traditionally been considered female: caring, emotion, intuition, connection, interdependence, for example. This working definition of feminism is decidedly and deliberately transformative, but is not hostile or exclusionary.

In many ways, education itself is an act of care giving, regardless of the age of the students. In the field of early childhood education, however, it is impossible to tease apart the twin strands of education and care, especially with the youngest children. The staff at my son's infant-toddler day care center referred to themselves both as teachers and as caregivers with little distinction: the field has even coined the neologism "educarers" (Gerber 1979) to represent the interwoven nature of these responsibilities.

In terms of history, philosophy, and focus, however, the issues of day care and education are somewhat more distinct. In the late nineteenth century, when early childhood education was taking root in America, two distinct perspectives emerged. One, generally referred to as the kindergarten movement, emphasized the education of young children and sprang from a German tradition. The other branch, the day nursery movement, focused on the custodial care of children whose mothers worked, and was inspired by the French creche model. Unfortunately, some of the terms used in the past tend to obscure specific details of the various programs, such as the ages of the

children involved, the length of the school day, or the nature of the curriculum, and therefore make a full and clear understanding of the situation a bit more difficult. Despite these difficulties, I feel that I must attempt to separate the two. Availability of day care is already an important item on the agenda of many contemporary feminists: the separation of feminist thinking and young children is not a problem in this particular facet of early childhood education. In the project I am proposing here, I will be attending primarily to educational issues-- pedagogies, classroom practices, curricular decisions-- rather than to issues relating to the provision of custodial care, for it is in this aspect of early childhood education that the feminist presence is most sorely missed.

A Very Brief Overview of Feminist Theory

There are multiple feminist perspectives, and many ways to be a feminist. However, there are several essential elements at the core of feminist thinking. Feminist theory is based on the observation that women have been oppressed and devalued by the patriarchal biases in our society (Narayan 1989, Mies 1991, Farganis 1989). Feminists believe that women must be empowered, and advocate the acknowledgement, affirmation and celebration of women, women's experiences, and women's perspectives. Women have traditionally been marginalized in our culture, but feminists place women and women's ways of knowing (Belenky et al. 1986) at the center of their world view. Finally, feminist theory is transformative: it "provides groundwork for our collective effort to recast and remake the world" (Fisher 1987, p. 23). Feminists envision a future in which women's voices, and all marginalized voices, will be respected and heard.

Feminists assert that the information and facts which form the foundation of Western knowledge are not objective truths. This information was recorded by men, reflected the perspective of men, and focused mainly on the experiences of men (Maher 1983). This has given men exclusive power and ownership over certain types of high-prestige knowledge. Feminist scholars (and others, including post-positivist philosophers and post-modernists) have pointed out that what has generally been labelled the "truth" actually represents only a fraction of the reality of any given historical moment. The world view commonly presented as universal can no longer be considered universal. As an antidote to the traditional androcentric views of the world espoused by generations of male scholars (and female scholars working in male-dominated fields of inquiry), feminist scholars have offered dramatic reinterpretations of history presented from the perspective of women.[1] By attending to the experiences of women, feminists have encouraged all scholars to recognize that both male and female experiences are varied and specific, thus challenging the notion of universality (Maher 1985). Further, in exposing the flaws of our commonly held assumptions, feminism calls for a critical examination and re-evaluation of all of our paradigms.

By questioning the existence of objective knowledge, feminism directs its scholarly energies into the realm of the subjective. Feminist scholarship provides evidence that different people, because of the specifics of their life situations and experiences, have experienced different realities (Fisher 1987). Further, feminism actively values the knowledge embodied in personal experience. Feminist scholarship is characterized by an emphasis on

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[1] For an example of this type of research, see Joan Kelly's "Did Women Have A Renaissance?" in Bridenthal and Koonz (eds.). 1977. *Becoming Visible: Women In European History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

personal experience and personal perspectives, a reflection of the familiar feminist notion that "the personal is political".

Feminist Epistemology

Feminist scholarship requires more than a simple shifting of subject matter, analyzing women instead of men. It involves adopting a specific critical stance, developing a different understanding of knowledge, and engaging in a process intended to critique and transform society. Feminist writings on the nature of knowledge and knowing take many different forms, and focus on many epistemological notions. The feminist scholarship on epistemology that is most relevant to my research agenda deals with the examination and exploration of that has come to be called women's ways of knowing (Belenky et al. 1986).

Feminist scholars have indicated that many women's ways of constructing knowledge, solving problems, and interacting with the world are distinctly different from the ways of men and, therefore, different from the ways that have been traditionally accepted and valued (Belenky et al. 1986). Ruddick (1980), Belenky and her colleagues (1986) and Noddings (1984) have proposed that women have gender-specific ways of interacting with their world. Called "maternal thinking" by Ruddick, "connected knowing" by Belenky et al., and referred to in terms of "caring" by Noddings, these woman-ways spring from experience in personal relationships, and are rooted in empathy, nurturance and love. Gilligan (1982), too, suggests that female ways of knowing are based on interdependence and concern for others. Rather than valuing objectivity and neutrality, feminist epistemology emphasizes "perspectivity" (Messer-Davidow 1985, p. 12), thus acknowledging

the value of different perspectives and opinions, and the role of emotion. By looking at individual differences in interpretation and experience, feminist epistemology attempts to "weave a fabric of knowledge in which variations are as important as commonalities" (Maher 1985, p. 52).

In the ways of knowing that have given shape to traditional scholarship, knowledge is objective and separate from the knower. In contrast, feminist epistemology posits that knowledge is contextually situated, and influenced by people's personal values, feelings and ideas. For feminists, "knowing becomes a collective endeavor grounded in our experiences; our experiences gain acceptance as evidence; and knowledge is transformed from an authoritative, free standing construct to a common, conditional formulation" (Messer-Davidow 1985, p. 18). The educational implications of this viewpoint are significant. Messer-Davidow suggests that traditional epistemologies sequester knowledge in academies, and organize education in ways that make it difficult for students and knowledge to meet on common ground. Feminist epistemology, on the other hand, asserts that students have the capability to create knowledge, and to engage with others in building meaning. Further, it implies that students have a responsibility to engage in this type of thought-making.

Theories of Early Childhood Education

Developmental psychology has long been the driving force behind research and practice in early childhood education (Walsh 1993; Bloch 1992; Kessler 1991a). Its influence is profoundly pervasive. The alliance between developmental psychology and early childhood education is certainly not monolithic or uniform (Spodek 1989a)-- the dominant conceptions reflect

dramatically different viewpoints-- but when educational programs for young children are classified or described, it is generally the theories of mind and learning influencing the program that determine where any given program will be placed.

For example, Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) refer to three views of human development that manifest themselves in early childhood education: cultural transmission, romantic, and progressive. The cultural transmission model is as old as the "classical academic tradition of Western education" (p. 453). It reflects the belief that the purpose of education is to enable students to acquire the specific skills and knowledge required for success in life and in our society. Skills are taught by direct or indirect means in programs espousing this viewpoint, and are often arranged in a careful, hierarchical progression of steps. The work of behaviorists such as Edward L. Thorndike and B.F. Skinner reflect this orientation, as did many of the programmed learning models of the 1960s.

In direct contrast, the romantic model embodies the belief that education and growth must come from within the child. Originating in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and exemplified by A.S. Neill, and Arnold Gesell, this view supports children developing at their own pace, unfolding organically and naturally. Educators in programs reflecting this orientation have no outcomes in mind other than to provide support for the spontaneous growth of their young students.

The progressive model, drawing on the work of Jean Piaget and John Dewey, is based on the notion that children play an active role in creating their own development. Children move through developmental stages as a result of active thinking about meaningful problems and challenges found in

the world around them, and their psychological structures are reorganized with each problem solved.

This last model currently wields the strongest influence in the field of early childhood education, and is embodied in the phrase "developmentally appropriate practice" (Bredekamp 1987). Developmentally appropriate practice, described in a widely influential position paper published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Bredekamp 1987) aims to take into account a child's developmental readiness for any particular task or activity. Teachers engaged in developmentally appropriate practices are sensitive to the particular needs of each child, and attempt to create a meaningful, challenging, responsive, and stimulating educational environment for all students, regardless of their location on the developmental continua. Children are given opportunities to learn through direct experience and hands-on explorations, and to engage in the types of problem-finding and problem-solving that lead to growth and development.

The NAEYC standards for developmentally appropriate practice arose in response to the trend toward pushing the skills-driven academic curriculum of the elementary school down into the classrooms of the very young. This trend has its roots in the the academic achievement frenzy that followed the launch of Sputnik in 1957, and in the compensatory education programs (such as Project Head Start) launched as part of the L.B. Johnson's War on Poverty in the mid 1960s. Expanding knowledge of child development, most notably Benjamin Bloom's (1964) assertion that half of an individual's intelligence can be accounted for in the first four years of life, added fuel to the fire of direct instruction for young children. The educational experiences that resulted from these influences, however, tended

to have a profoundly "psychometric" (Elkind 1989) flavor, and generally reflected a behavioristic or cultural transmission philosophy. Developmentally appropriate practice stands as a humane and sensitive alternative to "hurrving" children (Elkind 1981): forcing academic activities-- worksheets, phonics drill, flash cards-- on children too young to benefit from them.

Though it sounds benign, developmentally appropriate practice has recently come under critical scrutiny. The criticisms range from practical applications of educational philosophy (Spodek 1989b, Kessler 1991a) to concern over the artificial separation of cognition and affect (Jipson 1991); from more general critiques of the utility of the notion of broad and universal developmental stages (Walsh 1991) to specific concerns about developmentally appropriate practice's impact on teachers of young children (Jipson 1991); from concerns about issues of equity, fairness and diversity in the early childhood classroom (Sapon-Shevin 1993, Jipson 1991) to developmentally appropriate practice's focus on children's present state of children rather than on their potentials for the future (Kessler 1991b). Many of the critics of developmentally appropriate practice take an extremely strong stand, one that casts a dramatically new light on the practices that most early childhood practitioners hold as an ideal, a standard. I am intrigued by their critiques, not only because of their content, but because they remind us of the critical importance of re-thinking and re-evaluating our educational enterprises, constantly working to improve what we offer our children. I have no desire to reject developmentally appropriate practice, but the work of these critics has inspired me to think carefully about ways in which early childhood education could be enhanced and improved.

The feminist scholarship that characterizes women's ways of knowing in terms of relation, interdependence, and caring (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Ruddick 1989, Belenky et al. 1986; among others) described earlier in this paper has direct relevance to the re-thinking of early childhood education. This world view blends perfectly with the reality of working with young children by building on and further developing the early childhood educator's responsibility to care for young children. Developing this way of thinking into a perspective on educational and curricular decision making would be a significant enhancement of what developmentally appropriate practice currently provides our children and their teachers.

Love: Feminism's Contribution to Early Childhood Education

The feminist epistemology of "care, concern, and connection" (Martin 1990, p. 24) is known by many names, and has been articulated and elaborated upon by many different scholars. Each scholar has made her case carefully and thoroughly, drawing on evidence from fields of inquiry such as philosophy and psychology. Each chose her terminology with care. And while there are definite differences between Gilligan's different voice, Noddings' caring, Belenky et al.'s connected knowing, and Ruddick's maternal thinking, they are deeply similar in significant ways. To summarize this feminist position, Jane Roland Martin has coined the phrase "the 3 Cs"--care, concern and connection (1990, p. 24). Rather than use Martin's term, I intend to hang upon this highly complex and subtle web of words and emotions the general label "love". I know that this word is a very dangerous one, one with many different meanings, associations, and histories. But I would like it to function simply as a place-holder, a signifier, a shorthand

representation of the complex and profound human emotions and world views described by feminist epistemologists.

Placing love at the center of an educational enterprise has significant implications. Each educational decision, from placement of the desks to selection of academic content, is made with love for children as the guiding principle. Though this perspective is associated with women and women's ways of knowing, not all women educators organize their curricula around love. Furthermore, this perspective is not the exclusive domain of women. It is visible in the work of A.S. Neill (1960), and Herb Kohl (1984). One it its most eloquent spokesmen was John Dewey, who wrote "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (1902, p. 7)[2].

A love-based early childhood curriculum gives a new twist to the phrase *in loco parentis* : teachers are not just acting as parents, they are feeling and thinking as parents as well. But how do parents think and feel? How do they make their decisions? In her book *Maternal Thinking*[3], Sara Ruddick (1989) characterizes the three fundaments of parental thought: to preserve the life of children, to foster their growth, and to shape them according to some ideal of acceptability. Preserving life and fostering growth are already a standard part of most early childhood educational programs: the NAEYC position statement asserts that "a high quality early childhood program provides a safe *[preserve life]* and nurturing environment that

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[2] Dewey uses this sentence as a call for justice, not love per se. I see it as relating to justice in envisioning education on the large scale. But interpreted into the context of a single teacher or a single classroom, I believe that it represents love.

[3] Ruddick employs her own idiosyncratic definition of mother: "a person who takes on responsibility for children's lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life" (p. 40). Maternal thinking, then, can be engaged in by men and women alike.

promotes the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development *[foster growth]* of young children" (Bredekamp, 1987, p. 1).

But fostering growth makes little sense without a vision of where the children should be headed (Dewey 1938). The NAEYC standards do not address this crucial point (Spodek 1989b), but love-based educational philosophers do. Ruddick (1989) writes at length about the challenges inherent in "training a child to be the kind of person whom others accept and whom the mothers themselves can actively appreciate" (p. 104). Dewey (1938) describes the important role of continuity in education: for growth to be educative it must build on previous experiences and create conditions that lead to further growth and development. And Noddings (1992) addresses the issue head on: "The primary aim of every teacher must be to promote the growth of students as competent, caring, loving, and lovable people" (p. 154).

A Word on Mothers and Teachers

In suggesting that early childhood teachers should think in the ways that parents think, I am not suggesting that early childhood educators must be parents in order to fully understand their role. Nor am I suggesting that they cease thinking like professionals in the field, or return to the old-fashioned maternal model (Bereiter and Engelmann 1966) of teaching young children. There is a fair amount of overlap between teaching and mothering, to be sure-- Madeline Grumet has suggested that teaching is "a profession that claimed the colors of motherhood" (1988 p. 56)-- but the differences are significant.

Lilian Katz (1981) articulated seven dimensions along which mothering and teaching part company: scope of functions, intensity of affect,

spontaneity, scope of responsibility, partiality, attachment, and rationality. The scope of a mother's functions is diffuse and limitless. She is never off duty, and must be concerned at all times about all aspects of her child's life. The purview of teachers, on the other hand, is smaller and more tightly focused. A mother and her child are emotionally invested in one another in a way that leads to a high level of interpersonal intensity. As children struggle toward individuation, mothers and children have inevitable conflicts that teachers and children can avoid.

Katz asserts that mothers are free to be spontaneous; teachers should have explicit intentions and careful plans and rationales behind their decisions and actions. Further, mothers are responsible for one family. It will be heterogeneous, as all families are. But teachers are responsible for the children of upwards of thirty such families, and must take into account the concomitant range of cultural differences, expectations and family values. Katz suggests that teachers should remain impartial, in contrast to the partiality of mothers. Her definition of impartiality, that "whatever skills, knowledge, insights, techniques, etc. the teacher has at his or her disposal [are] made equally available to every child *as needed*" (p. 18), sounds almost like a recommendation that teachers act as if they were partial to every child. Because it requires teachers to be sensitive to the particulars of each of her students, impartiality could be subsumed into the "scope of responsibility" dimension.

I find Katz's final dimensions, rationality and attachment, less useful. She suggests that mothers need to be "crazy about their child" (p. 19), while teachers need to employ careful and logical reasoning. This distinction paints a fairly unattractive and unappealing picture of ditzy mothers and mechanistic teachers, and plays upon sexist stereotypes. Further, it reflects a

patriarchal assumption that there are two clear-cut categories-- rationality and irrationality-- and that one is better than the other. On attachment, the final dimension, Katz maintains that mothers and children are engaged in relations of "reciprocal caring", while teachers must maintain "detached concern" (p. 15). With this I disagree most heartily. Teachers should avoid being emotionally drained in meeting the needs of the children they teach, but becoming involved in a mutually caring relationship with students is one of the perks of teaching young children. Children and their teachers benefit from such relationships.

Still, there must be clear boundaries between teaching and mothering. Teachers are certainly not meant to be mother substitutes (Freud 1952), and should avoid becoming involved in rivalries with the mothers of their students. This is damaging to the students, and also prevents teachers from carrying out the parent education component of their responsibilities (Bredekamp 1987). Teaching and mothering, just like nursing and mothering, or ministering and mothering, are distinct and separate caring roles that can and should co-exist in the lives of young children.

Love in the Early Childhood Setting

In *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (1992), Nel Noddings asks the question "Can we make caring the center of our educational efforts?" (p. 14), and suggests drawing on the Dewey quote from *The School and Society* that I have cited earlier in order to create an image of our students as a large heterogeneous family for whom we are responsible. This image should then be used as a template for making educational decisions at the secondary level.

Underlying her question is the belief that high schools are, at present, not caring places.

Like Noddings, I am advocating centering our educational efforts around love and care. But early childhood settings, the focus of my attention, are not lacking in care. Care-giving is a basic and essential part of early childhood education: caring for children is part of the early childhood educator's mandate. But this emotional, interpersonal kernel that resides at the heart of early childhood education has never been given any educational authority. Love for children is a desirable personality trait for the teachers of the young (Katz 1971), but it is not considered a philosophical position or a basis for educational decision making. Those decisions have traditionally drawn upon developmental psychology. Love-based early childhood education environments, in direct contrast, would close the gap between what teachers do with children and how they feel about children. They take the love that already exists in many early childhood classrooms and place it on equal footing with more traditional and official sources of knowledge. So Nel Noddings and I stand in the same boat, but are attempting to rescue two different swimmers. Noddings' challenge is to create caring schools; mine is to create schools that care about caring, schools that give caring the respect and weight it deserves.

One reason, I suspect, that love for young children has been given little credence as a legitimate scholarly perspective stems from the history of the field of early childhood education. Early in the twentieth century teachers of young children were eager to appear professional, to be experts (Bloch 1987). Caring and love were very nice, but they were not as impressive as scientific knowledge. (In fact, this very criticism has been lobbed at feminist scholars who focus on the subjective, the interpersonal, the experiential rather than

the "objective facts" that constitute "real" science.) But caring and love are not non-intellectual acts (Jaggar 1989). As Eisner (1982) points out, cognition and affect cannot be separated:

> "This case cannot be made because the hard and fast distinction between what is cognitive and what is affective is itself faulty. In the first place there can be no affective activity without cognition. If to cognize is to know, then to have a feeling and not to know it is not to have it. At the very least, in order to have a feeling one must be able to distinguish between one state of being and another. The making of this distinction is a product of thinking, a product that itself represents a state of knowing." (p. 28)

Or, in the words of Sara Freedman (1990 p. 245), "effective caregiving cannot be divorced from thought, nor productive thought from caregiving." Love for children is both an emotional and an intellectual act, and as such forms a firm foundation on which to base an early childhood curriculum.

Accepting love-based early childhood education does not mean abandoning developmentally appropriate practice. Earlier in this paper I asserted that developmentally appropriate practice was too valuable to be dismissed outright. It deals thoroughly and sensitively with a fair amount of what needs to be considered in the education of young children, but it overlooks much that is important. Nesting developmentally appropriate practice within a love-based curriculum theory solves that problem. Teachers acting on their love for children are likely to turn to the NAEYC standards quite frequently in developing the best possible program for their students. But the NAEYC standards will be viewed critically, always being evaluated through the lens of love. In this way, feminism and early childhood education can be brought together to benefit both fields.

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